

VERMILION LIFE SAVING STATION

(Station No. 6)

(Station No. 9)

(U.S. Coast Guard Station No. 292)

Shore of Lake Superior, 10 miles west of Whitefish Point

Paradise vicinity

Chippewa County

Michigan

HABS MI-446

MI-446

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

FIELD RECORDS

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

National Park Service

U.S. Department of the Interior

1849 C Street NW

Washington, DC 20240-0001

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Location: Shore of Lake Superior, 10 miles west of Whitefish Point, Paradise vicinity, Chippewa County, Michigan

Present Owner: Wild Shore Foundation, as of 2005

Present Use: Bird sanctuary, adjunct educational and research facility for Lake Superior State University

Significance Statement: The original 1876 Vermilion Life Saving Station building stands as the last remaining example (with some additions) of the 1876 Lake Superior-type station designed by U.S. Life-Saving Service architect J. Lake Parkinson, who designed four of this type to be built along the Lake Superior shoreline. The station complex is a significant example of U.S. Life-Saving Service and U.S. Coast Guard facilities constructed to aid navigation in treacherous parts of the Great Lakes.

Historian: Information compiled by Justine Christianson, HAER Historian, 2007

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. **Date of erection:** The original Vermilion Life Saving Station was constructed in 1876 by the U.S. Life-Saving Service, with additions built prior to 1906. The U.S. Life-Saving Service had other buildings constructed on site as well. In 1938, the U.S. Coast Guard (who had taken over supervision of the station) had three new buildings constructed on the site to expand operations.
2. **Architect:** J. Lake Parkinson, architect and assistant superintendent of construction for the U.S. Life-Saving Service working out of Deer Park, Michigan, designed five station types and six unique stations from 1875-86. Seventy-two stations in all were built using his designs. One station

type he designed was called “1876 Lake Superior-Type.” Four stations were constructed following this design: Vermilion, Crisps Point, Sucker River and Big Two Hearted River, all along a 60-mile stretch of the southern Lake Superior shore.¹ Parkinson’s design for the Lake Superior-type simplified the Stick style types of Frances W. Chandler, architect for the U.S. Life-Saving Service in the 1870s.² The four Lake Superior-Type stations were the “only structures built with this particular design and were a unique architectural form for the Life-Saving Service.”³

3. **Original and subsequent owners, occupants, uses:** The original owner of the station site was the U.S. Life-Saving Service. The U.S. Treasury Department, the agency administering the U.S. Life-Saving Service, did not acquire a clear title to the land. In 1887, William B. Quigley and John and Priscilla Clarke bought 450 acres on Vermilion Point, including the station grounds, to grow and harvest cranberries. The title was resolved in 1888 when the Treasury Department properly acquired the title with some allowances for private usage. Cranberry production occurred alongside life saving operations until 1932, when production ceased. There are few remains of the structures associated with cranberry production left.⁴

In 1915, the U.S. Life-Saving Service and Revenue Cutter Service merged to form the U.S. Coast Guard, who then assumed ownership of the Vermilion Life Saving Station, with operations continuing.⁵ After World War II, the U.S. Coast Guard determined that Vermilion was no longer necessary since various technological improvements had made navigation of the area safer. Vermilion Point became a subunit of nearby Whitefish Point Coast Guard Station and was then surplused in 1947. Rose Watson of Ohio purchased the station for \$17,000 that year, and it remained abandoned. Unpaid property taxes made ownership uncertain, and in the early 1970s, Evan Noyes negotiated the purchase of Vermilion and surrounding lands. In 1976, Noyes donated the station to Lake Superior State University who then donated it to the Wild Shore Foundation, Inc. The site is now used as a research site due to its ecological significance and remote location.⁶

4. **Builder, contractor, supplier:** The builder, contractor and supplier for the original 1876 Vermilion Life-Saving Station are all unknown.

¹ Rationale for Nomination of VERMILION LSS to the “America’s 11 Most Endangered Historic Places,” 2001, p. 1; Edward J. Canfield and Thomas A. Allan, *Life on a Lonely Shore: A History of the Vermilion Point Life-Saving Station* (Sault Ste. Marie, MI: Lake Superior State University, 2001), 4.

² Quinn Evans/Architects, “Vermilion Life-Saving Station, Chippewa County, Michigan, Stabilization and Relocation Feasibility Analysis,” prepared for Lake Superior State University, 17 November 1995, 1.

³ Canfield and Allan, 4.

⁴ See Canfield and Allan, Chapter 3: “The Clarkes and Their Cranberries.”

⁵ Rationale for Nomination, 1.

⁶ See Canfield and Allan, Chapter 7: “Vermilion, the Ghost Town.”

Materials for the construction of the station had to be brought by barge from Sault Ste. Marie since no roads accessed this isolated site.⁷

In 1938, the Works Progress Administration worked with the U. S. Coast Guard to have three additional buildings constructed onsite.⁸

- 5. Original plans and construction:** The 1876 floor plan of the frame station shows that as constructed, the building was a T-plan. An entry vestibule to the east provided access to both rooms of the first floor. The living room was to the north, and on the south living room wall was a staircase leading up to the second floor as well as a door to a pantry, housed in the space underneath and to the west of the staircase. The living room (including the stairway and pantry) measured 16' x 16'. The boat room was located to the south of the living room on the first floor and could only be accessed by the entry vestibule, not the adjacent living room. It measured 13' x 31'.

The staircase landing on the second floor opened to the keeper's bedroom to the north and the boatmen's bedroom to the south. The keeper's bedroom measured 16' x 16', including the stairway and landing. The boatmen's bedroom was 16' x 13'. Flanking the boatmen's bedroom was attic space. The second floor above the entry vestibule was also designated attic space.

The exterior of the original life-saving station had Stick style architectural details, such as steeply pitched cross gables, decorative trusses in the gable of the north elevation, and decorative detailing, as seen on the east and west elevations and the ridge.⁹ Trefoil windows adorned the gable roof at the east and west ends.

As originally built, the five-room plan housed the keeper and his family, six surfmen, and the necessary boats and equipment to conduct life saving operations.¹⁰

- 6. Alterations and additions:** Some time prior to 1906, additions were made to the original station plan. Although the original plan of the keepers building was T-shaped "with the southern most wing on the east side matching the existing west wing," 20' was added to the southern wing and the "wing on the east side was also added later."¹¹ On the first floor,

⁷ Canfield and Allan, 4.

⁸ Canfield and Allan, 65.

⁹ See HABS No. MI-446 measured drawings and accompanying field records, as well as Canfield and Allan, 5-6.

¹⁰ Canfield and Allan, 7.

¹¹ Quinn Evans/Architects, 1.

the original boat room to the south of the living room was divided into two rooms. The eastern room measured 12' x 16'-7" and the western room measured 12' x 13'. In the western room, a door was added to the north wall that allowed access through the pantry into the living room. To the east of the original boat room, a 24' x 13' two-room addition was constructed, with a vestibule addition measuring 7'-7" x 7'-7" to the south. The original boat room doorway on the east elevation that opened to bring the life saving boats in and out of the building was framed over and a single door built. A new, larger boathouse was later constructed to the east. The original vestibule entrance was also altered so that it extended to the face of the north elevation. To the east of the extended vestibule was a one-room addition measuring 10'-6" x 7'-8". The original, extended vestibule was enclosed after the addition to the east had been completed.

On the second floor, the rear of the building was opened for use as bunk rooms, with the west attic space remaining as a storage space. A new stairway was built in the bunk room addition on the east side of the room. The keeper's bedroom at the front remained.¹²

Photographic evidence indicates the construction of other structures on the site in addition to the station during the U.S. Life-Saving Service tenure. These include a boat house and a watch tower.¹³

In 1938, the U.S. Coast Guard had three new structures built on the station grounds, including a garage boathouse, a four-story station house, and a private residence for the Chief Petty Officer-in-Charge. The newly built four-story station house had "offices, a mess hall, living quarters for up to 20 men, a basement with workshops and storage rooms, and an infirmary. At the top of this large building was an enclosed tower with windows on all sides and surrounded by a 'widow's walk'.... This tower gives the false impression that it served as a lighthouse." The three new buildings as constructed "were sided with cedar shakes that were painted white, and topped with red roofs. The buildings were connected by cement sidewalks."¹⁴

7. **Present Condition:** Moving sand dunes have buried the lower portions of the remaining buildings and have caused twisting in the additions to the original station, although the original structure remains plumb. There has

¹² See HABS No. MI-446 measured drawings and accompanying field records.

¹³ See Canfield and Allan, especially 10-11.

¹⁴ Canfield and Allan, 65, see Chapter 6: "Vermilion Station U.S. Coast Guard," for historic images from the Coast Guard era.

been water intrusion, which has caused plaster to fall and flooring to rot. The windows have been removed and boarded up.¹⁵

B. Historical Context:

Vermilion Life-Saving Station is located on the southern shore of Lake Superior about 70 miles west of Sault Ste. Marie in an area originally inhabited by Ojibwa (Chippewa) Native Americans. French traders named the site “vermilion” for the red ocher deposits found in the area.¹⁶ Early navigation of parts of Lake Superior was treacherous and hampered trade and industry. From 1846 to 1875, there were sixteen major shipwrecks on the south shore of Lake Superior from Munising to Sault Ste. Marie, despite the opening of a lighthouse at Whitefish Point in 1848. The number of shipwrecks earned the area the title of “Shipwreck Coast” and “Graveyard of the Lakes” and brought the treacherous nature of the coast to the attention of the U.S. Life-Saving Service, which had been created in 1871 as part of the U.S. Revenue Marine under the Treasury Department.¹⁷ In 1878, the U.S. Life-Saving Service became a separate agency within the Treasury Department, and in 1915, it combined with the Revenue Cutter Service to form the U.S. Coast Guard.¹⁸ In March 1873, the Secretary of the Treasury authorized the board to evaluate the coastal areas and Great Lakes for the most effective sites on which to erect life-saving stations and to provide an estimate for the cost of construction. The completed report by the U.S. Life-Saving Service included plans for four First Class Life-Saving Stations to be built at a cost of \$5,302.15 between Whitefish Point and Point AuSable on Lake Superior: Vermilion Point, Big Two Hearted River, Grand Marais, and AuSable Point. Congress approved the construction of twenty-eight stations, including the four on Lake Superior, in June 1874. After a survey by Capt. J.H. Merryman in September, Crisps Point and the mouth of Sucker River were chosen instead of Grand Marais and AuSable Point. The stations were then constructed in 1876.¹⁹

Once Vermilion had been constructed, a keeper employed by the U.S. Live-Saving Service lived at the station all year.²⁰ The keeper recruited and trained the crew and kept the station ready for rescues. He also served as a customs inspector during shipwrecks. In addition to the keeper and his family, a crew of six to seven surfmen lived at the station in the “active season,” lasting generally from May to November depending on weather conditions and determined by the district supervisor. Family members of the surfmen lived nearby in cabins rather than in the station house. The surfmen kept watch in a separate watch tower building and also by doing beach patrols at night and in bad

¹⁵ The Quinn Evans/Architects Vermilion Life-Saving Station Stabilization and Relocation Feasibility Analysis provides a condition assessment from ca. 1995.

¹⁶ Canfield and Allan, 1; Rationale for Nomination, 2.

¹⁷ Canfield and Allan, 2-3; Rationale for Nomination, 2. “Shipwreck Coast” name from Quinn Evans/Architects, 1; and “Graveyard of the Lakes” name from Canfield and Allan, 3.

¹⁸ Rationale for Nomination, 1; Charles K. Hyde, *The Northern Lights: Lighthouses of the Upper Great Lakes* (Lansing, MI: TwoPeninsula Press, 1986), 33-34.

¹⁹ Canfield and Allan, 2-4; Rationale for Nomination, 2.

²⁰ The first keeper was William C. Knox. The complete list of keepers can be found in Canfield and Allan, 81.

weather. The typical watch lasted four hours. The surfman walking the beach would walk west to a halfway house between Vermilion and Crisps Point, where he would meet a surfman from Crisps Point. The two would exchange metal tags to prove the patrol had been completed and each would return to their station. The patrolling surfman would then switch positions with the one who had been standing watch in the tower walking east to a lock box where the time of arrival would be noted. Monday through Saturday, the surfmen participated in various types of disaster drills.²¹ Between 1876 and 1935 (when the U.S. Coast Guard assumed management), the station was involved in 1,003 calls for assistance and saved approximately 900 lives.²²

Under Coast Guard management, the basic function of the station remained the same. In 1944, Vermilion became a sub-unit of Whitefish Point Coast Guard Station after technological improvements made navigation safer. Three years later it was surplused. The 1947 sale to Rose Watson made the station private property.²³ In the early 1970s, Evan Noyes purchased the station, which had fallen into disrepair due to the effects of vandalism and weather, and hired a local contractor to begin rehabilitating the surviving buildings. Progress was so slow that Noyes had work stopped on the project.²⁴ In 1977, he donated the station to the Nature Conservancy and then to Lake Superior State University, who donated it to the Wildshore Foundation Inc. in 1994.²⁵

PART II: SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Canfield, Edward J. and Thomas A. Allan. *Life on a Lonely Shore: A History of the Vermilion Point Life-Saving Station*. Sault Ste. Marie, MI: Lake Superior State University, 2001.

Hyde, Charles K. *The Northern Lights: Lighthouses of the Upper Great Lakes*. Lansing, MI: TwoPeninsula Press, 1986.

Quinn Evans/Architects. "Vermilion Life-Saving Station, Chippewa County, Michigan, Stabilization and Relocation Feasibility Analysis." Prepared for Lake Superior State University, 17 November 1995.

Rationale for Nomination of Vermilion LSS to the America's 11 Most Endangered Historic Places, 2001.

²¹ Canfield and Allan, 7, 10-12, 14.

²² Canfield and Allan, 51.

²³ Canfield and Allan, 66-67.

²⁴ Canfield and Allan, 72, 75.

²⁵ Rationale for Nomination, 3.